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Seeing and Being Seen at the Margins: Insight into God from the Wilderness

Luke Hillier

Introduction: *"She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar."*

(Gen. 16:1)

Throughout the history of the Jewish and Christian religious traditions, Hagar has been a character in the biblical story who has often gone unnoticed and overlooked. Her story, which takes place only in the sixteenth and twenty-first chapters of Genesis, is one that easily falls into obscurity, overshadowed by the ongoing narrative of Abraham and Sarah which is emphasized by the narrator and the faith traditions at large. In fact, the majority of the commentary regarding the account, which deals with the decision to use Hagar as a surrogate mother in order to ensure that Yahweh's promise to Abraham is fulfilled, does not even take Hagar's perspective into consideration, focusing instead on what the experience meant for Abraham and Sarah and what the theological implications of it are.

In more recent scholarship, particularly from a feminist/womanist perspective, the character of Hagar and her plight described in Genesis has received previously unexplored interest. This is due partly to the emblematic and archetypal role that Hagar has and the increasing prevalence of modern readers who are able to see their own experience reflected in her's. Phyllis Trible notes:

As a symbol of the oppressed, Hagar becomes many things to many people. Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose identity shrinks in service to others.¹

However, for many of these scholars, the evaluation of Hagar's story is decidedly negative and disparaging—although Hagar is celebrated, the other charac-

1 Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 26.

ters, including Yahweh, are condemned. When God is interpreted to be on the side of Sarah and Abraham, against Hagar, the account is read as a sanctioning of patriarchal injustice against women and a sacred legitimization of the mistreatment of those most marginalized and oppressed. When analysis of the passage is done from a modern perspective, this is of course a valid and understandable view, but for those within the Jewish or Christian tradition, it is one that yields little hope for Hagar or anyone else who finds themselves at the margins of life. Fortunately, this is not the only conclusion that can be made.

It is difficult to avoid reading our own perspective into the book of Genesis, which is a representation not of contemporary American culture but of ancient Israelite norms. However, when the text is approached from the context in which it was written, an understanding considerably more aligned with the authorial intent and original meaning is made possible. For this reason, it is beneficial to account for significant cultural disparities when reading Hagar's story, if only because it allows for conclusions to be made that reflect the author's intent which may otherwise be obscured through a modern lens. That is, of course, not to say that there is no ability for this ancient text to connect with the experience of the modern reader, but rather to argue that instead of projecting our own interpretations onto the text, we should allow it to speak into us. In doing so, there is the potential to find insight, both personal and theological, which is otherwise beyond our reach.

Instead of ignoring Hagar's experience entirely or assessing it through our modern viewpoint and immediately drawing conclusions reflective of contemporary understandings, I argue for a reading of Genesis 16 that strives to interpret the story in correlation with the world from which it was written. In doing so, readers will no doubt still find Hagar's treatment deplorable and her position at the end of the chapter dangerous. However, this can no longer be seen as treatment passively authorized by God, as a closer analysis of the interactions between Hagar and Yahweh and of the way in which the narrator describes Hagar will reveal. Instead, one can conclude that it is precisely at the outskirts where Hagar experiences God most intimately and finds herself transformed and blessed. Thus, a literary and culturally contextual reading of Genesis 16 that exposes the oppression of Hagar through the denial of her agency, the erasure of her identity, and ultimately the threat to her life will allow for an understanding of the encounter between her and Yahweh, yielding the theological insight that it is at the margins where one is most clearly seen and most capable of seeing God.

Agency Denied: “Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” (Gen. 16:2)

To modern readers, one of the most problematic elements of Hagar’s experience is the way that her autonomous agency is rejected by Sarah and Abraham (at this point, Sarai and Abram), those who have power over her as her masters. Genesis 16 takes place years after Abraham is promised by Yahweh to become the father of a great nation (Gen. 12:2), and yet we are told that he and Sarah have been unable to conceive even one child together. Sarah appears to assume that this is due to her barrenness, and she therefore tells Abraham to try to impregnate her Egyptian slave, Hagar.

A contemporary perception would see even this, the suggestion to allow for polygamy or at least surrogacy, as a morally questionable event in the narrative; however, to ancient Israelite readers, this would not have been the case. Because of the critical need for children, particularly sons, in order for families to carry on, the use of a concubine serving as a surrogate for barren wives was not seen as scandalous, but functional, and it was commonplace for families wealthy enough to own female slaves who could fulfill the role.² For this reason, Sarah’s suggestion should not be seen as anything beyond the realm of culturally accepted practices at the time, and the potential arguments regarding the extreme measures taken by using a surrogate are rendered inappropriate here.

Returning then to the point regarding the rejection of Hagar’s agency in this process, it is obvious that Sarah gives no consideration to the wishes of her servant, therefore hindering her ability to play any active role in the situation. Unfortunately, this too is not necessarily out of line for ancient Israelite culture, a point Robert Alter makes when he says, “. . . Hagar, to put it brutally, is a piece of property. . . . the two Hebrew words for her, *Shifhah* and *Amah*, both mean ‘a slave woman.’ In my translation, I decided to call it ‘slave girl’ to make it as demeaning as possible because, face it, she’s a piece of human property, owned by Abraham and apparently acquired in Egypt.”³ Perhaps somewhat brutally, his interpretation reveals that the dehumanization of those considered slaves was a harsh reality and that for Sarah to take Hagar’s desires into account before offering her to Abraham would be nearly unthinkable, since the “slave girl” would be seen as an object, not an equal. Furthermore, even if Hagar had been recognized as an equal by Sarah, that would have been unlikely to change much, as

2 John Blenkinsopp, “The Family in First Temple Israel,” in *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 64.

3 Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 188.

all women, regardless of their freedom, were given very little agency over their marriages and the inevitable sexual experiences necessary to carry on the family that followed.⁴

Although a reading of Hagar's treatment within the ancient Israelite context from which it was written softens many of the modern conclusions regarding the severity of her experience, that in no way suggests that she avoided oppression altogether. In fact, even after doing significant research on the reality of life in ancient Israel, Alicia Suskin Ostriker's midrash reimagining of the Genesis account still capitalizes on the devastation Hagar would have felt at the way in which her agency was rejected by Sarah.⁵ Despite our inability to assess with perfect accuracy the effects that this treatment would have had on Hagar, it goes without saying that the way in which her body was treated like an object and her human agency denied in the process would do damage to whatever internal sense of self she had been able to maintain. Therefore, despite the fact that, within her culture, the circumstances are significantly less unforgivable than they appear today, the denial of Hagar's agency should still be considered and condemned as a violation that will eventually serve as a catalyst for her encounter with God. Unfortunately, this is not the only way in which she was subjugated—in the Genesis 16 account we also see evidence of the erasure of her identity.

Identity Erased: "I gave my servant to your embrace . . ." (Gen. 16:5)

Another element of Hagar's experience that can easily be interpreted as oppressive to the character is the holistic erasure of her identity. The text introduces her as an Egyptian servant, implying that in order to live with Abraham and Sarah, she has been uprooted from her homeland and effectively severed from all ties to her former life prior to becoming their slave. Furthermore, a careful reading of Genesis 16 shows that whenever Hagar is described by Sarah or Abraham, her name is never used.⁶ In verses 2 and 5, Sarah refers to her only as "my servant" and in verse 6 Abraham does the same, calling her "your servant" when responding to Sarah. The possessive pronouns of "my" and "your" are indicative of the previously noted objectivation of Hagar, a point commented on by Miguel De La Torre when he notes, "Hence, Sarai accomplishes what God prevents through the object, not the person, of Hagar."⁷

4 Blenkinsopp, 59.

5 Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 73.

6 Sharon Pace Jeanson, *The Women of Genesis* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 19.

7 Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis (Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible)* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 172.

Returning to the context from which Genesis 16 was written may once again illuminate the way that original readers may have reacted to this treatment. During this period, women as a whole were considered to be property of the family's patriarch, and enslaved women were indeed expected to also serve under the authority of the wives, meaning that Hagar's experience was not unique in that regard.⁸ This cultural norm is likely to be audacious to the modern reader; however, it is critical to account for the ways in which a person conceptualized their identity then compared to now. William Countryman explains, "The value of each individual—so fundamental to modern democracy—was inconceivable in [an ancient Israelite] context. In its place stood the value of the family, which was the basic social unit."⁹

On one level, the ancient Israelite perspective that understands the family, not the individual, to be the building block of society makes Hagar's plight all the more devastating. Torn away from her family and reinserted into one that fails to reflect her own cultural customs and traditions, Hagar is inevitably forced to abandon central components of her original identity with little promise of it paying off considering her low-status as a slave in her new family unit. However, at another level, it potentially suggests that the erasure of her identity as understood by the refusal of both Sarah and Abraham to use her name is less problematic than the contemporary reader would expect. While at some level this is likely the case—without the expectation of being seen as an individual, Hagar would be less affected by that reality—the text possibly suggests that the objectification she faced was excessive and unjust. Although Sarah too would have been considered the property of Abraham, he uses her name multiple times throughout Genesis. However, perhaps more revealing than that is the intentionality on the part of the narrator to use Hagar's name each of the five times she is described outside of Abraham and Sarah's dialogue; this consistent and explicit use of Hagar's name stands in sharp contrast with Abraham and Sarah's total refusal to say it. Furthermore, it can also be noted that the narrator does at one point in the chapter refer to Sarah, but never Hagar, only by her title, saying "her mistress" in verse 4. In doing so, the narrator is essentially reversing the treatment Hagar receives from her masters, presenting Sarah only through a dehumanized title and, through the use of the possessive pronoun "her," acknowledging her identity only in relation to Hagar's dynamic with her. Thus, even when taking context into account, readers can argue that the way in which Hagar's identity was erased by Sarah and Abraham had the

8 L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, Revised Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 148-149.

9 Ibid., 146.

potential to be deeply corrosive to her well-being and was another piece of the foundation that eventually led to her desperate escape, which also acts as her final and most critical experience of marginalization.

**Life Threatened: “*Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.*”
(Gen. 16:6)**

As the narrative progresses, the oppression that Hagar faces escalates, going beyond dehumanizing treatment to physical abuse until she finally finds herself at the very margins of existence, fleeing into the dangers of the wilderness. Following Abraham’s use of Hagar as a concubine in accordance with Sarah’s suggestion, we are told that Hagar does in fact conceive and begin to act differently towards her mistress because of this, inciting a rage that eventually results in Sarah acting violently against Hagar which prompts her to flee.

Current feminist/womanist critiques of this portion of the text take issue with what they feel is a negative portrayal of Hagar that ultimately places blame on her for the dangers she faces in the wilderness, and many English translations allow for such a reading. For example, the ESV Bible, reads, “And when [Hagar] saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress,” which is considerably strong language often read as a vilification of the previously victimized character that justifies her later abuse (Gen 16:4). Although some appreciate this reading, such as Bharti Mukherjee who comments, “I hope that Hagar smirked. . . . The smirk is the only way of dissenting that is allowed for a woman from a [disempowered position],” many commentators feel that translations like this are far too severe.¹⁰ Bill Moyers poses the alternative of “Sarah was lowered in her esteem,” which is a significantly less drastic interpretation that suggests that Hagar was in some way disappointed in Sarah.¹¹ This understanding would yield insight on the damage done to Hagar through Sarah’s rejection of her agency in the surrogacy process, and it is what informs Ostriker’s midrash reimagining that emphasizes the pain and betrayal Hagar feels after being used by Sarah.¹² Alternatively, one could see Moyers’ translation as an indication that Hagar, after becoming pregnant with Abraham’s child, simply saw herself as more of an equal to Sarah than before, a view corroborated by Claus Westermann’s commentary: “She looks down on her—the translation ‘despised’ would be too strong—because a woman’s status rises when she becomes pregnant. Natural maternal pride now finds expression,

¹⁰ Moyers, 194.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ostriker, 73.

and Sarah is offended.”¹³ Regardless of the specific implication that Hagar’s look would express, the consensus still argues that the narrator in no way depicted her as beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior, which nullifies any claims that the narrative framing is used to justify Sarah’s abuse. In fact, a closer look at the text and the cultural context reveals that Hagar is actually framed in a way that would have inspired sympathy from readers and indignation on her behalf.

Looking again at what is possibly missed in translation, Burton Visotzky notes that the Hebrew term used in verse 6 to describe Sarah “dealing harshly” with Hagar is the exact same one chosen to describe the oppression that the Hebrew slaves endure at the hand of the Egyptian Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus.¹⁴ In this way, a dual set of similarities is made between Sarah and Pharaoh as oppressors and Hagar and the Hebrew slaves as the oppressed, and it is unlikely that ancient Israelite readers would find themselves siding with the former pair in that moment. Furthermore, bearing in mind what was customary regarding the treatment of concubines at the time, Sarah’s abuse appears to be completely out of line, as Perdue notes:

Concubinage involved a female slave, either foreign or Hebrew, who was owned by a household and bore for it children to add to the labor pool . . . She was something of a second class wife of one of the males in the family. . . . A concubine could assume the role of a surrogate mother for the childless wife. She was to be supported by the household and was even allowed to rest on the Sabbath.¹⁵

Thus, the cultural norms would have called for an increase in status and privilege for Hagar now that she was pregnant with the child of the household patriarch, in no way authorizing the violent abuse she received instead. In this way, Sarah’s response is seen to be an expression of excessive and uncalled for jealousy incited by a spitefulness and insecurity towards Hagar, which certainly does not paint the mistress in a positive light.¹⁶

After having her agency denied in the surrogacy process and her identity erased through the separation from her family and homeland as well as experiencing ongoing objectification from Sarah and Abraham, this unjust and culturally unacceptable violence against her becomes the final catalyst that makes Hagar desperate enough to escape. Westermann elaborates:

13 Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 124.

14 Moyers, 191.

15 Leo G. Perdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” in *Families in Ancient Israel* by Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 189.

16 Countryman, 149.

The story narrates the origin of emancipation. Abraham had said to Sarah: “your maidservant is in your hand,” where “hand” is the equivalent of power. The word “emancipation” means *e manu capere*, where *manus* is likewise power. The will to be liberated and the acceptance of danger to one’s life which goes with it is always part of emancipation or the like. It is precisely this that is reported of Hagar. She cannot and will not endure such treatment from Sarah; she will be liberated from her, and she sees the only possibility of liberation in flight, even though it endangers her life and that of her unborn child.¹⁷

Delores Williams, a womanist scholar who is notably critical of this narrative, is in agreement with that interpretation, stating, “[By fleeing] Hagar becomes the first female in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power structures.”¹⁸ However, her endorsement of the account essentially ends there, and she along with many others find fault in the fact that by liberating herself, Hagar is only catapulted into the dangers of the desert wilderness, once again finding her life threatened there. While this straightforward reading does seem quite bleak and without hope, that is unlikely to be the interpretation that the author intended to inspire. Instead, readers would have been left with the notion that the previous treatment that Hagar has suffered, while inexcusable, was ultimately worthwhile, for it is precisely at the margins that she is seen by God and blessed tremendously because of the encounter.

Seen by God: “And he said to her, ‘Hagar . . . ’” (Gen. 16:8)

It is here in the desert wilderness that Hagar is now approached by God. Although many scholars, as we will see, appreciate this moment between the two, others have found fault in three elements of their interaction in particular. One is the fact that most translations state that an “angel” or “messenger” of the Lord is the one who finds her in verse 7, and it is only later, if at all, that Yahweh reveals himself to her, seeing it as a second-rate treatment that fails to truly acknowledge her. Another feature that receives criticism is the nature of the promise that Hagar receives from the Divine, in that it explicitly revolves around the son she carries in her womb rather than her as an individual. The third portion most often criticized is the command Hagar receives to “Return to your mistress and submit to her” in verse 9. If one takes a fresh look at the text through the perspective of an ancient Israelite, however, these problematic components would not be seen as such.

¹⁷ Westermann, *Genesis*, 241-242.

¹⁸ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Maryknoll, 1993), 19.

Dealing first with the possibility that Hagar was not encountered by Yahweh himself but only an angel acting as an intermediary between the two, it must be noted that this way of writing about God—first describing him as an “angel” only to later reveal that it is Yahweh himself, as is done in verse 13 of this chapter—is a frequent technique seen throughout the Hebrew texts and should not for allow for assumptions that belittle the encounter.¹⁹ Furthermore, the fact that Hagar is approached at all is a moment that is rare and revelatory. Claus Westermann comments that “The salutation in Genesis 16:8 has a special significance for the narrative. It is found only in narratives involving a small circle of characters. In it contact is made and an existing sense of solidarity is preserved; rejection of this salutation means rejection of this solidarity. In the desert, far from human habitation, this meaning is especially relevant.”²⁰ Echoing the sentiment of the final sentence, Walter Brueggemann’s reading of Hagar’s escape into the wilderness sees it as essentially suicidal. He notes, “[Verse 16:7] is a curious break in the story. It shows that all parties—Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael—would have left well enough alone. All parties except God! It is God who reopens the issue. The positive implication is that God is turned toward the outsider.”²¹ His understanding would clearly suggest that, without divine intervention, the typical expectations would have been fulfilled, which would have meant the death of Hagar travelling across the desert wilderness alone, and thus God’s encounter with her saves her life.

Turning to the complaint regarding the centrality of Ishmael, her son, rather than Hagar herself as the primary focus of the blessing she receives, we should again note that the family and not the individual was the basic social unit. Therefore, a blessing to Hagar’s firstborn son was a blessing upon her directly.²² Jo Ann Hackett, however, notes that the fact that Hagar, a woman, was receiving a divine promise that recognizes her future legacy at all would have been read by ancient Israelite readers as incredibly significant and radical, saying:

[God] then aggrandizes her by promising that *her* descendants will be “greatly multiplied,” that they will be innumerable. This is said in language typical in the Genesis narrative of what is usually called “the promise of the patriarchs,” a divine promise of descendants and often land. The surprising thing here, however, is that the promise is made to a woman. This is the only case in Genesis where this typical J-writer

19 Jo Ann Hackett, “Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of an Epic Pattern,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day, 12-27 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 15.

20 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 125.

21 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 152.

22 Countryman, 146.

promise is given to a woman rather than to a patriarch, and so we sit up and take notice.²³

In fact, R. H. Jarrell has dealt extensively with the various interactions between Yahweh and mothers that follow and mirror this one with Hagar, and he concludes, "Yahweh does not make covenants with women; Yahweh instead makes contractual relationships that are expressed in the literary form known as the birth narrative."²⁴ With this understanding, the promise that Hagar receives is certainly nothing to balk at, as it is seen to be a correlate with the one that Abraham himself receives from God.

Thirdly, when considering the modern critique of Yahweh's command that Hagar returns to Sarah as her slave, it is logical to be frustrated and even appalled by God, but the narrative itself is not framed to inspire such a reaction. One commentator notes that returning was the only way to ensure that Hagar could have and raise Ishmael, as the harsh environment of the desert wilderness was unlikely to allow for that.²⁵ Although contemporary readers would be likely to ask why God could not have performed the impossible by aiding her in the process, it is crucial to note that the writers of the Hebrew text lacked the Greek conceptualization of God as omnipotent in which such a question is rooted, instead presenting him to be a significantly more limited character within the stories. Furthermore, the narrative in no way suggests that this command to Hagar somehow invalidates her struggle for liberation or serves as a punishment from God, as it precedes the promise to follow. Instead, it seems as though Hagar's encounter with Yahweh is what allows her to return, as noted by Burton Visotzky who says, "Having been physically abused, she is told by an angel to go back and endure some more. Now, 'go back and endure' is not a message anyone likes to hear. But through her endurance, she merits blessing and becomes someone who speaks with God. She is transformed."²⁶ When considering the catalysts behind this transformation, the promise she receives is an obvious cornerstone, as it would provide a faith and hope previously unreachable for Hagar. However, even before Hagar receives the command to return to Sarah, the narrative includes two details that were likely to be transformative, both of which are found in verse 8, the first sentence that Yahweh says to her.

The first detail to take note of is the very first word God says to Hagar, which is her name. After already exposing the intentional avoidance of the use of her

23 Hackett, 15.

24 R. H Jarrell, "The Birth Narrative as Female Counterpart to Covenant," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 97 (2002): 4.

25 Jeansonne, 37.

26 Moyers, 210.

name by Sarah and Abraham compared to the consistent use of it by the narrator, it should be clear that for Yahweh to acknowledge her by her name is a significant moment, as it marks the first time that readers see it spoken aloud to her. Beyond that, Gerald Janzen's analysis of the text suggests that the question "Where have you come from?" also has significant meaning to Hagar. The obvious answer is that she is fleeing from her mistress, and this is the response that Hagar gives. However, Janzen comments, "Yet before she was a slave to these Hebrews, she was a woman of Egypt. That is where she originally is 'from.' And the angel does address her by her name 'Hagar,' thereby touching who she most deeply is."²⁷ In this way, Yahweh has reaffirmed two critical elements of Hagar's identity that have long been erased by Abraham and Sarah: her name and her place of origin, the latter of which seems to be of particular importance to Hagar as she chooses an Egyptian woman for her son to marry when she is later given that power.²⁸ Thus, the multiple ways in which Yahweh sees and blesses Hagar in this passage, including turning himself towards her to save her life, entering into a relationship with her that mirrors the covenant he made with Abraham, and acknowledging her unique identity prior to her enslavement all serve to transform her in the wilderness in a way that prepares her for what follows, as noted by Thomas Dozerman who says, "In Genesis 16 the wilderness takes on significance as a place of temporary escape, transformation, and rite of passage for a hero."²⁹ Lastly, we can see that although modern readers may take issue with her treatment here, Hagar's own response reveals only gratitude and praise: "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me." (Gen. 16:13). What is of interest for the final point, however, is her comment just before that, in which Hagar makes it known that she has not only been seen by God, but has also seen him.

Seeing God: "You are a God of seeing." (Gen. 16:13)

While some may consider the climax of this narrative to be verses 11 and 12, in which Hagar receives the blessing of divine promise from God, another reading suggests that the truly groundbreaking moment takes place afterwards, in verse 13 when Hagar responds. Although she does express appreciation and awe for Yahweh as he sees and looks after her, Hagar also performs something significantly more radical by bestowing upon Yahweh a new name. The reality of this is somewhat lost in the English translation written in the title, but in the Hebrew text

27 Gerald J. Janzen, "Hagar in Paul's Eyes and in the Eyes of Yahweh (Genesis 16): A Study in Horizons," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 13, no. 1 (1991): 8.

28 Jeansonne, 52.

29 Thomas B. Dozerman, "The Wilderness and Salvation History in the Hagar Story," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998): 32.

it is clear that she refers to God using a title never given to him before: “El Roi,” which is translated as “God who sees.”³⁰ However, what is also lost to the modern reader is the weight of this action, and by analyzing the fact that Hagar names God at all as well as the name she chooses for him, we can yield insight into the meaning of this moment.

For readers in an ancient Israelite context, the significance of Hagar naming God would have been monumental, as the act of naming was such a meaningful experience particularly within the Israelite’s religious tradition. Michal Shekel shares:

In these early chapters of the Torah, the act of naming is highly significant. It is both empowering and embracing. . . . God names the children of Sarah and Hagar. God will also rename adult individuals, beginning with Abram and Sarai. From the very beginning, humans name animals and humans name each other. Yet here, for the first and only time in a Divine encounter, a human, a woman, names God.³¹

Thus, within its context the instance of Hagar naming God, an action that Torre notes “only a superior” would perform for those “lower in status” than themselves, would appear controversial and even audacious.³² In the narrative, however, there is no indication that this decision was considered to be problematic. In fact, Shekel argues that the inclusion of Hagar naming God is an indication of the narrative favoring her character in comparison to others, saying, “Abram has never done this, nor has anyone else. Throughout the early chapters of the Torah, Abram needs signs to substantiate his covenant with God. Hagar is somehow more accepting, more comfortable with God. Hagar accepts her encounter for what it is. She takes initiative and she names God.”³³ Although many of these comments can be taken to imply that Hagar was in some way superior to other biblical characters, including Yahweh himself, taking a closer look at what she chooses for his name could indicate that this gesture was received by God not because he had to as an inferior to Hagar, but because what she said about him was deeply and powerfully true.

Considering this is the one instance in the Bible where God is given a name by a human, it is worthwhile to examine the name that is chosen. Jeansonne makes a critical point regarding the uniqueness of the name and the deeply personal way in which it relates to Hagar, saying, “it is clear that Hagar named the

30 Torre, 176.

31 Michal Shekel, “Lech Lecha: What’s in a Name?” In *The Women’s Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*, ed. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), 59.

32 Torre, 176.

33 Shekel, 59.

Deity in response to her experience. God has seen her, the experience did not consume her, and she still lives to receive God's plan for her and for her child. The narrator indicates that Hagar appropriated this experience and identified it by her unique naming of God.³⁴ Thus, it is clear that instead of attributing to God a name that applies in all circumstances and for all people, Hagar's choice was one born directly from her own understanding of him, shaped by this distinct encounter. Westermann, in concordance with this, comments, "That is not to say that Hagar gives to a hitherto nameless divine being a name that sticks to him everywhere and always; this is never so with a human being in the O.T., but Hagar says, 'For me he is, whatever else he may be called, the God who sees me, i.e., the one who came to my aid in my distress.'"³⁵ That her naming of Yahweh is directly followed by her words of praise and gratitude for him is indicative that, for Hagar, "El Roi" is a positive title, one that speaks to the goodness of a God who saw her sorrow at a time when she was most marginalized and saved her from that distress.

Conclusion: "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me." (Gen. 16:13)

What could this suggest, then, that Hagar alone is the sole figure shown to name God and that the name she chooses is "the God who sees"? One conclusion is that it reveals that it is at the margins of existence, where one is most disappointed by this world and most desperate for something beyond it, that humans are most capable of being seen by and seeing God.

Despite enormous cultural disparities that make it difficult to gauge the oppression that Hagar experienced through her own perceptions of reality, modern readers are still able to see that she was severely disempowered and mistreated. With no consideration for her own wishes, Hagar was given to Abraham by Sarah to be a surrogate mother, and in that moment all autonomous agency was stripped from her. By uprooting her from her Egyptian homeland and refusing to ever voice her actual name, Abraham and Sarah ensured that Hagar had her identity erased as she became increasingly dehumanized and severed from her former self. Lastly, due to abusive treatment from Sarah that would have been considered unjust at the time, Hagar is forced to flee into the desert wilderness, where she is inevitably confronted with the threats of starvation, thirst, and a fatally inhospitable environment. However, as the account continues, it seems as though these adversities are only the foundation necessary to eventually catapult Hagar into the wilderness where God reveals himself to her.

34 Jeansonne, 46-47.

35 Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 247.

That Hagar is seen by God in the wilderness is an indication that God is drawn to those who suffer: the thirsty and exhausted, the homeless and lost, the stranger and runaway, the abused and violated, and all who are cast to the margins. The narrative reveals that it is not until Hagar is in the wilderness that she finds herself seen and known, indicated by Yahweh speaking her name and referencing the place she came from before enslavement. Beyond that, although she is seen in suffering, she is also given a hope for its eventual end in the promise given to her by Yahweh, allowing for an inner transformation that enables her to return to her masters in order to raise her child.

Furthermore, Hagar is not only provided for and seen by God in the wilderness; she also sees God there for herself. This is revealed through her privileged position as the only human in the Hebrew texts to bestow a name upon God. Although this action was customary during that time to imply the superiority of the namer over the named, it seems more likely that Hagar's name was received by God because of its representativeness of him. The narrative shows that the action was not a moment of arrogant domination over and against the Divine, but one borne utterly out of her own experience at the margins and the intimate way in which she came to encounter God there. In this way, Hagar's experiential theology allows for a conceptualization of God that is creative and unique, unknown to the world prior to her own revelation of insight about who God is for her and her alone. This is divulged from the name that she chose—El Roi, "the God who sees"—a title that speaks to the truth of God's embrace of her at a time when by all others she was most un-seeable. Beyond that, as revealed by her declaration of worship and gratefulness following this naming, this is a moment of deep joy for Hagar, suggesting that the name is a gift that she offers to the God who sees her rather than one imposed onto a God she resents and claims superiority over. In this way, she exists as an archetype, certainly for all those listed by Phyllis Trible, but also for any who have been forced to exist in the wilderness and have found themselves both seen by and able to see God from exactly there.

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